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Green, Samuel Abbott

A number of villages near
Groton, Massachusetts...

Groton, Mass.

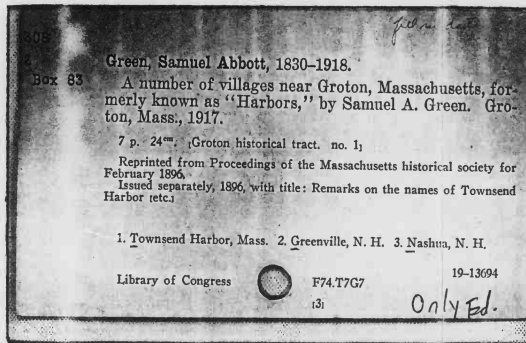
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NEAR
GROTON, MASSACHUSETTS
FORMERLY KNOWN AS
"HARBORS"

BY
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(Groton Historical Tract No. One)

A NUMBER OF VILLAGES NEAR GROTON,
MASSACHUSETTS, FORMERLY KNOWN
AS "HARBORS"

The following article was printed first in the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, for February, 1896. At the request of a few friends I reprint it with slight additions and alterations.

Near the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a group of three villages, far from the sea-coast, lying in the same general neighborhood, on the northerly side of Groton, of which each bore in part the name of Harbor. They comprised the villages of Townsend Harbor, Mason Harbor, and Dunstable Harbor, situated respectively in the towns of Townsend, Massachusetts, and of Mason and Dunstable, New Hampshire. Two of these towns are adjacent to each other; and Dunstable, the third town, now known as Nashua, is but a short distance away. Of these three villages, Townsend Harbor is the only one which still bears the name.

So far as my knowledge goes, these are the sole instances in New England where the word "Harbor" is connected with the name of a settlement away from the coastline, or from a large body of water, like the village of Centre Harbor on Lake Winnepesaukee.

Names of places all have a history of their own, connected in some way with the neighborhood, though often the origin of the name is wrapped in obscurity. It is never beneath the dignity of an historical writer to throw light on disputed subjects and to clear up doubtful points even in trivial matters.

The question naturally arises, Why were these three villages called "Harbors"? As the local antiquaries do not agree in their answer, I purpose to let them speak for themselves.

Mr. Ithamar B. Sawtelle, in his History of Townsend, gives some facts concerning a pioneer of that town, and then goes on to say:—

Nothing further is known of him except that he was in charge of a log-house made in a defensible manner against losses by the incursions of the Indians. One of these castles was located north of the Harbor and overlooking the same, and another near the meeting-house on the hill, and the same tradition further saith that the log-houses and mill, where the Harbor now stands, and the direct surroundings were called "*the Harbor*," because by signals from these three points, in case of the appearance of any "red skins," the settlers could soon reach these places of safety (pp. 61, 62).

Mr. John B. Hill, in his Centennial Address at Mason, alluding to Mason Village, says in a note:—

Then called the Harbor. A word of explanation of this term may not be deemed out of place. In the early settlement of the country, towns were laid out upon the sea-coast, on which in many of them there was a bay, cove, or mouth of a river, used as a harbor for vessels. The meeting-house, where town meetings were held and public business transacted, was at the center of the town, but it often happened that the "Harbor" was the principal if not the only mart of trade in the place. And when, in an inland town, a locality on its border became the principal mart of trade, it was known by the same name of Harbor, as Mason Harbor, Townsend Harbor, Dunstable Harbor. (Proceedings of the Centennial Celebration at Mason, August 26, 1868, page 42.)

On June 28, 1872, Mason Village was incorporated as a separate town under the name of Greenville.

Dunstable Harbor was a small settlement on the south side of Salmon Brook, near its mouth into the Merimack River. At one time in the early part of the century the local Post-office was established there. Allusions to the place are found in Charles J. Fox's "History of the Old Township of Dunstable" (pp. 193, 195, and 270).

On January 1, 1837, the name of the town of Dunstable, New Hampshire, was changed by legislative enactment to Nashua, now the second largest city in that State.

It will be noticed that Mr. Sawtelle and Mr. Hill do not agree in their theories as to the origin of the name; and I shall not attempt to decide between them. There is no account on record that Townsend was ever seriously threatened by the Indians,—with possible exceptions during the years 1747 and 1748,—though the inhabitants of the town in early times may have taken precautionary measures to ward off the attacks of the enemy. Many years ago Mr. Sawtelle wrote me that formerly there was a tradition that the village was first called "Tory Harbor," on account of the number of tories living there during the Revolution; but he was inclined to doubt it, as there were so few of that class in the immediate neighborhood. Perhaps the present designation is a survival of part of this name. In the town of Claremont, New Hampshire, there is a locality known to-day as "Tory Hole," from the fact that it was a place of favorite resort for tories in Revolutionary times.

I take this opportunity to pay a tribute to my old friend Ithamar Bard Sawtelle, who was born at Brookline, New Hampshire, on February 2, 1814, and died at Townsend, Massachusetts, on November 1, 1905. He was an accurate antiquary and was the author of several historical papers and of a History of Townsend, Massachusetts, his adopted home. The Centennial address at Brookline, New Hampshire, in the year 1868, was delivered by Mr. Sawtelle. On May 23, 1850, he married Miss Martha Ann Hannah Campbell Bills, of Brookline, and three children were born to them, viz.:—

Arthur Bills Sawtelle, born on May 7, 1851, and died October 14, 1852.

Carrie Frances Sawtelle Stickney, who died several years ago, and

Bertha Sawtelle White, wife of Howard Bertram White, of Ayer.

His funeral was attended by a large number of friends and neighbors, who came together to pay their last respects to one, who, for many years, had played a prominent part in town affairs.

Many years ago Mr. Sawtelle called my attention to a mistake or inaccuracy in Butler's History of Groton, which might lead the investigator into serious error. It is found on page 291, of the History and is as follows:—

William Prescott, the second son of the aforesaid Benjamin, removed from his birth-place after the death of his father, and while a minor, to the part of his father's estate which is now in Pepperell; probably the land given by the proprietors for services in procuring the grant of Groton Gore, as has been related in a former chapter.

The point to which I object in this quotation comes after the word probably. The word "probably" should not appear there, as this parcel of land had no connection whatever with the grant of Groton Gore. A correct cut of Groton Gore is given on page 32, in "The Boundary Lines of Old Groton," by Dr. Green. The land lies in several towns, near the southern boundary of New Hampshire, and some miles west of Pepperell.

In "The Farmers' Cabinet" (Milford, N. H.) August 22, 1895, is another allusion to the Groton Gore, which confirms my account of the matter. The article is found in the Groton Historical Series (IV, 229).

When the new line was run between the two Provinces, in 1741, a considerable part of the land was lost by Massachusetts. This loss caused much feeling south of the Boundary and was the subject of controversy. After a long dispute between the two Provinces which lasted more than thirty years it was finally settled by the General Court of Massachusetts, on April 12, 1772.

All these so-called Harbor villages are situated on small streams: Townsend on the Squannacook River, where there is a mill-pond; Mason on the Souhegan River, where also there is a mill pond; and Dunstable on Salmon Brook, near the Merrimack River. Townsend Harbor is the oldest of the three settlements; and the name

may have been carried, by example or through imitation, thence to Mason, which is only a few miles distant. I am inclined to think, however, that its origin was due to a popular fancy then existing in the neighborhood of giving the second name of "Harbor" to villages of ambitious hopes. It might be added, too, that this would help public sentiment in favor of a later change.

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